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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI AND INR/B

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SUBJECT: WEAK AMIR PRESIDES OVER OPENING OF PARLIAMENT;
FOCUS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, IRAQ, AND THE PALESTINIANS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b)

11. (C) A frail Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah opened the National Assembly session on October 26, marking the start of the second year of Kuwait's tenth National Assembly legislative term. The Amiri address, traditionally delivered by the Amir at the beginning of each session, was instead read by Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad. (Note: The Amir is required by the Constitution to open the Assembly, and, with some coaching, he managed to whisper the necessary phrases at the beginning of the session. End Note.) The speech urged political and economic reform in the new year to include granting women political rights and passing political and economic reform legislation. He said Kuwait will continue to pursue its development strategy and reduce dependence on oil, and further remarked that the government intends to make the country a commercial hub by developing Kuwait's airports and harbors. The speech also addressed Kuwait's intensified fight against terrorism and condemned acts of terrorism perpetrated by "Israel against the Palestinians" calling for a return of international observers to the region. He also assured Iraqis that Kuwait will continue to help Iraq through its current difficult stage.

12. (U) Speaker of Parliament, MP Jassem Al-Khorafi, also spoke, saying that MP performance in the last session was "below expectations" and that MPs and Ministers should ensure development, stability, and peace for Kuwait. Al-Khorafi added that the world should stop laying the blame for terrorism on Islam and called on the international community to act "immediately to protect Palestinians against Israel's continuous aggression." After the ceremonial remarks, elections were held for membership of the National Assembly's ten permanent and eight ad hoc committees. Islamist MPs made a strong showing, securing the chairmanship of four permanent committees.

Comment

13. (C) After the ceremonial opening, Kuwait TV aired coverage of the Amir greeting Cabinet Ministers and MPs. As each Kuwaiti well-wisher approached, one of the Amir's aides could be seen whispering into the Amir's ear. (Note: While it is unknown what was said, in the past, aides have been known to provide the Amir the name of those coming to greet him. End Note.) Throughout this period, the Amir was standing on his own limited strength, but in a permanent stoop. The very weak Amir was even unable to readjust his "iqal"--the black corded material that holds the white "ghutra" in place in the Arab headdress--when it was inadvertently bumped during opening ceremonies. An embarrassed silence pervaded the hall as aides attempted to re-adjust the Amir's headgear.

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LeBaron